NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

INFORMED QUESTIONS PAPER:

ISRAELI POLITICAL ISSUES

Lt Col MICHAEL S. STOUGH, USAF
COURSE 5604
THE GLOBAL SECURITY ARENA

SEMINAR F

PROFESSOR
DR. TERESA SABONIS-HELF

ADVISOR
COLONEL JACK LEONARD

Report Documentation Page		*Form Approved* *OMB No. 0704-0188*
<td colspan="3">Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</td>		

1. REPORT DATE **2003**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2003 to 00-00-2003**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Informed Questions Paper: Israeli Political Issues**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT **see report**		
15. SUBJECT TERMS		

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES **11**	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**			

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

Introduction

Israel has a parliamentary democracy, with a 120-seat parliament and a cabinet led by a prime minister (the leader of the largest party represented in parliament). Members of parliament are elected by proportional representation for a four-year term. Parties qualify for a parliamentary seat if they receive at least 1.5% of the national votes cast, leading to a wide variety of "niche" parties. During the most recent election, 30 parties vied for seats, but only 15 passed the vote threshold.

The Palestinian conflict apparently dominated the recent elections, as the Israeli public seemed to "move to the right" away from the liberal parties. Israel also continues to struggle with the proper religious-secular balance in society, and this debate appeared to impact the elections as well: a secular party—Shinui—became the third-largest party in the parliament. Finally, Israel's economic difficulties have also received a great deal of attention in the political arena. The following questions revolve around the outcome of the most recent election, its potential impact on major political issues, and government prospects for success when dealing with those issues.

Questions

1. Israel's legislative body is the unicameral Knesset, composed of "120 members directly elected by proportional representation for a four-year term."[1] Beginning in 1996, the prime minister was directly elected as well.[2] Coupled with the relatively low 1.5% national vote threshold for Knesset representation, direct election of the prime minister led to increasingly fragmented electoral outcomes and governmental instability. In response, the Knesset repealed the direct election measure, returning the original process, whereby the leader of the party with

---

[1] Country Report: Israel, Palestinian Territories (London, 2003), 5.
[2] Ibid, 8.

the largest number of seats becomes the prime minister.[3] Despite the Knesset's action, however, the number of parties passing the 1.5% threshold dropped only slightly from the 2001 totals— from 15 to 13. Has any consideration been given to raising the vote threshold for Knesset representation in order to further decrease political fragmentation?

2. During the January elections, the Likud Party won an impressive 37 seats, almost double the seats it held in the last Knesset, and nearly twice the number of seats (19) won by the Labor party.[4] Initially, Ariel Sharon appeared to have several options to form a government, but Amram Mitzna, head of the Labor party, refused to join a coalition. As a result, the Likud party has now formed a government with Shanui (15 seats), a secular party; National Union (7 seats), a "hawkish party" that "opposes any concessions to the Palestinians;" and National Religious Party (5 seats), "considered the main political force behind the settlement movement."[5] Given the pro-settler, anti-Palestinian sentiments of the two smaller parties, can Sharon honor his avowed commitment to the peace process?

3. The new governing coalition excludes the ultra-Orthodox parties, including Shas, Likud's traditional ally. Instead, Sharon "brokered an agreement" between secularist Shinui and the National Religious Party that gives Shinui control over the Interior Ministry—and therefore the power over designation of Jewish identity—and commits to ending mass exemption of yeshiva students from military service, as well as curtailing subsidies to large families.[6] In return, Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, Shinui party leader, agreed to "rein in" his more ambitious plans for reform of

---

[3] Ibid, 9.
[4] Gil Sedan, "A Guide to the 13 Israeli Parties That Will Be in Incoming Knesset," JTA.org 29 January 2003, <http://www.jta.org/page_print_story.asp?intarticleid=12365&intcategoryid=1> 18 February 2003.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Chemi Shalev, "Soft Side to Sharon's 'Hard-Line' Coalition," Forward 28 February 2003, <http://www.forward.com/issues/2003/03.02.28/news9d.html> (27 February 2003).

secular-religious relations.[7] Does this coalition foretell a coming marginalization of religion in Israeli politics?

4. Moderate Arab governments throughout the region ironically expressed a preference that Labor remain outside a unity government, hoping that the result would be an "unstable, unpopular far-right coalition that could then be toppled."[8] As possible evidence of their prescience, the National Union, a right-wing member of the new coalition, filed a letter declaring strenuous opposition to "the possibility of creating a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River." Moreover, National Union stated that it "completely opposes the creation of a Palestinian state and will act to prevent its establishment."[9] Given Sharon's commitment to "painful concessions" to secure peace, is a right-wing coalition inevitably unstable in the current security environment?

5. The 1951 Women's Equal Rights Law, and the 2000 amendment, have given women equal status in property rights, estate rights, workforce protections, education, health, housing, and social welfare. Despite the sweeping legislation, however, women continue to face resistance to their attempts to engage in public worship (at the Western Wall, for example), and religious courts still hold extraordinary sway over personal status issues like marriage and divorce— women can't initiate divorce proceedings, for example.[10] Is the Israeli government considering any initiatives that would enhance the status of women in Israeli society? Are any initiatives possible with the new right-wing government, or is a Labor party presence required in order to make any progress on women's rights issues?

---

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ben Lynfield, "Arab Moderates Root for Israel's Labor Candidate," Christian Science Monitor 22 January 2003.

[9] "Sharon to Present Government," United Press International 27 February 2003, <http://www.upi.com/print.cfm?StoryID=20030227-053101-3407r> (27 February 2003).

[10] "Status of Women," Hillel, <http://cms.hillel.org/nr/exeres/0DFECCC3-02DD-477E-B76B-7FF3B55043B4.htm> (10 February 2003).

6. According to The Economist, "a large proportion of the public supports dismantling Jewish settlements in the Palestinian Territories and accepts, if not welcomes, the idea of a Palestinian state, backing a return to negotiations even while the conflict continues to rage."[11] Sharon has said, however, that resumption of negotiations will require—in addition to sweeping Palestinian reforms—either an end to the violence or the removal of Yassir Arafat from power.[12] In addition, while promising not to initiate any new settlements, Sharon has stated, "the government will respond to the needs of development in the settlements."[13] Going further, Sharon signaled that the Palestinians will have to abandon the right of return for refugees if they ultimately want to reach a comprehensive agreement with Israel, and that Jerusalem will "remain a united city under Israeli sovereignty."[14] Given these statements, the short-term prospects for renewed negotiations appear bleak. Are these statements simply rhetoric meant to satisfy the right-wing members of the ruling coalition, or do they portend a continuing stalemate? Has Sharon left himself any maneuvering room, or will his coalition collapse if he attempts negotiations prior to a complete cessation of violence (heretofore an "unachievable reality")?

7. For the past 20 years, Likud's primary support base has resided within the Sephardic community (also known as Oriental Jews, or Mizrahi), composed primarily of low-income Jews "with right-wing tendencies." As a consequence of Likud's neglect of "the social and welfare needs of Sephardic Jews…as well as the widening gaps in income and resource accessibility" between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic, or Western, Jews, the ultra-Orthodox Shas party has managed to garner considerable Sephardic support. In fact, in the last Knesset, Shas was the

---

[11] Country Report: Israel, 8.
[12] Shalev.
[13] "Israel's Sharon Unveils New Hardline Cabinet," CTV.ca 27 February 2003, <http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/print?brand=generic&archive=CTVNews&date=20030227.htm> (27 February 2003).
[14] "Netanyahu Takes Finance Post in New Cabinet," The Jewish Week 27 February 2003, <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=7508&print=yes> (27 February 2003).

third-largest party, with 15 seats.[15] After winning only 11 seats in the recent election, however,

Shas found itself excluded from the newly formed government. What factors led to the

significant decline in votes for Shas? Can the party benefit from its position as an opposition

party when the government takes steps to reduce social spending?

8. Despite the fact that "most of the Likud supporters and about a third of its Knesset faction are

Sephardi," Sharon's new cabinet includes only two Sephardic ministers, contradicting the past

practicing of ensuring that approximately half of the ministers were of Middle Eastern or North

African origin.[16] Sharon's selections have fueled a "public outcry" against the cabinet's "so-

called 'white' complexion," and prompted complaints that Israel was returning to the days when

"the cabinet included one 'token' Sephardi."[17] Sharon has declared his initial focus to be the

ailing economy, which will inevitably require "hard decisions." Given the disproportionate

impact those decisions will have within the economically disadvantaged Sephardic community,

have Sharon's cabinet selections endangered his base of support at a critical time?

9. Liberal parties experienced significant losses in the recent elections: Labor lost 6 seats—

winning only 19 seats—and the "dovish, secular" Meretz party saw its position reduced from 10

to 6 seats.[18] The parties' "dovish" stance in the face of increased security concerns among the

electorate has been cited as the primary reason for their poor showing. Do the election results

reduce pressure on the government to work toward a negotiated solution?

10. Amram Mitzna has refused to join a coalition with Likud, citing differences with Sharon

over the proper approach to the stalled peace process. Specifically, the Labor party leader has

claimed that "Sharon's vague promises of diplomatic progress are contradicted by his flat refusal

---

[15] Country Profile: Israel, Palestinian Territories (London, 2002), 8..
[16] Shalev.
[17] "Sharon to Present Government."
[18] Sedan.

to commit to any evacuation of Jewish settlements in the territories," and that Sharon's refusal to put his diplomatic pledges in writing provides proof of his "disingenuousness."[19] Mitzna has, however, promised to "back Sharon if he advances the peace process," agreeing to act as a "safety net" to allow Sharon to advance the peace process without worrying about the collapse of his government. Mitzna's position has been criticized by other Labor leaders, including Shimon Peres and Binyam Ben-Eliezer, both of whom held posts in the last cabinet and believe Labor should have joined the current government. Moreover, Labor's poor showing in the last election has damaged Mitzna's credibility as party leader. What are Mitzna's prospects for continued "survival" as Labor leader? Is he strong enough to determine the circumstances and timing of his party's entry into a governing coalition?

11. Israeli Arabs comprise approximately 20% of the Israeli population and have in the past demonstrated their political power. For example, Arab parties were essential to the survival of Labor governments from 1992-1996, and were especially critical to keeping Rabin's government in office "in the face of the 1993 Oslo Accord."[20] The Arabs weren't, however, able to translate their increasing political power into social gains. For example, Israeli Arab villages continue to receive less funding than Jewish areas, affecting the quality of Arab schools, infrastructure, and social services.[21] Ironically, the Palestinian conflict has marginalized the political power of the Arab population, as security concerns have provided the Likud party a significant electoral advantage, thereby mitigating the marginal utility of smaller parties, whether Arab or Jewish. Moreover, approximately one-third of the Arab voters "abandoned" the Arab parties in favor of predominantly Jewish parties, primarily due to disappointment over Arab Knesset members'

---

[19] Shalev.
[20] Osama Khalifa, "Arab Political Mobilization and Israeli Response," Arab Studies Quarterly Winter 2001.
[21] "Status of Israeli Arabs," Hillel, <http://cms.hillel.org/nr/exeres/0DFECCC3-02DD-477E-B76B-7FF3B55043B4.htm> (10 February 2003).

"preoccupation" with the Palestinian conflict to the exclusion of local concerns.[22] What are the

long-term prospects for Arab political power?

12. Israel's Basic Law (the state's "mini-constitution) stresses the nation's Jewish ethnicity;

moreover, the law states that "a political party will be disqualified at election time if it calls for

the State of Israel to give its Arab citizens full and equal right as its Jewish citizens." The law

also disqualifies any political party that challenges "the Jewish character of the State of Israel."[23]

Ironically, the right to vote—extended to all citizens of Israel—is considered as one of the few

areas in which Arabs enjoy equality, but the legal restrictions on party platforms have been

criticized by both Arabs and liberal Jews as denying the Arabs equal status in the Jewish state.

Recent legal developments have brought the election laws into greater question. Israeli Arab

leaders Azmi Bishara and Ahmed Tibi were banned (later overturned by the Israeli High Court

of Justice) from running for the Knesset, based on statements the men made that threatened to

negate "Israel's character as a Jewish state."[24] Although the ongoing Palestinian conflict played

a role in the context within which the statements were viewed, the government has wrestled with

this issue since the late 1970s. As the Arab population within Israel increases, more questions

are expected to be raised concerning the ethnic nature of the state. Can the electoral process

continue to accommodate these voices without revision of the Basic Law? What are the

implications for democracy in Israel?

12. During the swearing-in ceremony for the 16th Knesset, Sharon told Knesset members that "a

'central' goal of his new government would be to increase immigration to Israel." Under the

Law of Return, as amended in 1970, the guidelines for determining immigration eligibility

(centered around the question of "Jewishness") were greatly relaxed. Consequently, non-Jews

---

[22] Frank Bruni, "Israeli Arabs Lose Political Faith as Election Nears," New York Times 26 January 2003.
[23] Khalifa.
[24] Ben Lynfield, "An Arab Israeli Pushes Israel's Free-Speech Limit," Christian Science Monitor 3 January 2003.

comprised a significant percentage of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who arrived from

the former Soviet Union between 1989 and 1999 (estimates of the percentage of non-Jews range

from 5 to 50 percent, with most clustering toward the high end). The new push for immigration

will probably have a more secular character as well. For example, the Israeli Cabinet plans to

bring to Israel "some 18,000 to 20,000 Ethiopians," either through the Law of Return—which

allows immigration based on Jewish ancestry—or through the Law of Entry—which grants

citizenship based on humanitarian grounds or for family reunification.[25] Cabinet officials

acknowledge that the Ethiopians are "unable to prove any lineage to Judaism."[26] The plan is

projected to cost as much as $2 billion, "about 5 percent of the government's total annual

expenditures," and it comes at a time when the government faces the necessity to slash spending

in order to control the deficit.[27] Critics contend that the new wave of immigration is intended to

maintain pressure for an "annexationist policy" regarding the West Bank and Gaza, and to ensure

Israel remains a "non-Arab" state. As Ian Lustick notes, "with Jewish emigration from Israel at

historically high levels in the 1980s and immigration rates relatively low, with Jewish rates of

natural increase diminishing and Arab rates remaining at considerably higher levels, with Arab

out-migration greatly reduced by…the 1991 Gulf War, and with calls for large scale "transfer" of

the Arab population fading from respectable political discussion," Russian immigration "figured

crucially in this fight over the state's future.[28] How will the new waves of immigration affect

Israel's "Jewishness"? Given the current economic environment, is it time to reconsider the

state's immigration policies?

---

[25] Matthew Gutman, "Israeli Cabinet OKs Mass Aliyah for 18,000 Falash Mura in Ethiopia, JTA Daily, <http://www.jta.org /page_print_story.asp?intarticleid=12437> (18 February 2003).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ian Lustick, "Israel as a Non-Arab State: The Political Implications of Mass Immigration of Non-Jews," The Middle East Journal Summer 1999.

Bibliography

Bruni, Frank. "Israeli Arabs Lose Political Faith as Election Nears." <u>New York Times</u> 26

    January 2003. Proquest (5 February 2003).

<u>Country Profile 2002: Israel, Palestinian Territories</u>. The Economist Intelligence Unit. London,

    2003.

<u>Country Report: Israel, Palestinian Territories</u>. The Economist Intelligence Unit. London, 2003.

Gutman, Matthew. "Israeli Cabinet OKs Mass Aliyah for 18,000 Falash Mura in Ethiopia." <u>JTA</u>

    <u>Print News</u>. <http://www.jta.org/page_print_story.aspintarticleid=12437> (18 February

    2003).

Khalifa, Osama. "Arab Political Mobilization and Israeli Responses." <u>Arab Studies Quarterly</u>

    Winter 2001. Proquest (16 February 2003).

"Israel's Sharon Unveils New Hardline Cabinet." <u>CTV.ca</u> 27 February 2003. <http://www.ctv.ca

    /servlet/ArticleNews/print?brand=generic&archive=CTVNews&date=20030227.htm>

    (27 February 2003).

Lustick, Ian. "Israel as a Non-Arab State: The Political Implications of Mass Immigration of

    Non-Jews." <u>The Middle East Journal</u> Summer 1999. Proquest (16 February 2003).

Lynfield, Ben. "An Arab Israeli Pushes Israel's Free-Speech Limit." <u>Christian Science Monitor</u> 3

    January 2003. Findlaw (10 February 2003).

Lynfield, Ben. "Arab Moderates Root for Israel's Labor Candidate; Although Trailing in the

    Polls, Amram Mitzna is Viewed as a Better Partner in Efforts to Promote Peace."

    <u>Christian Science Monitor</u> 22 January 2003. Proquest (5 February 2003).

"Netanyahu Takes Finance Post in New Cabinet." <u>The Jewish Week</u> 27 February 2003.

    <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=7508&print=yes> (27

    February 2003).

Sedan, Gil. "A Guide to the 13 Israeli Parties That Will Be in Incoming Knesset." <u>JTA Print</u>

    <u>News</u> 29 January 2003. <http://www.jta.org/page_print_story.asp?intarticleid=12365&

    intcategoryid=1> (18 February 2003).

Shalev, Chemi. "Soft Side to Sharon's 'Hard-Line' Coalition." <u>Forward</u> 28 February 2003.

    <http://www.forward.com/issues/2003/03.02.28/news9d.html> (27 February 2003).

"Status of Israeli Arabs." <u>Hillel</u>. <http://cms.hillel.org/nr/exeres/0DFECCC3-92DD-477E-B76B-

    7FF3B55043B4.htm> (10 February 2003).

"Status of Women." <u>Hillel</u>. <http://cms.hillel.org/nr/exeres/0DFECCC3-92DD-477E-B76B-

    7FF3B55043B4.htm> (10 February 2003).